

Lost in Excellence?

The discourse on scientific excellence and its gender dimensions - some observations from Austria

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The discourse about excellence

- Project on Gender & Excellence on behalf of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
- 3 Modules:
 - ‚Discourse analysis‘
 - Gender bias in selection & funding of scientific projects?
 - Gender bias and gender specific barriers in scientific careers?
- Status-quo analysis
- reflections on international discussions
- proposals for policy actions

The concept of ‚excellence‘ in science and technology policy making

- „Excellence“ – *the* guiding concept behind current research policy debates in Austria:
 - ‚excellence strategy‘ – S&T Strategy Document by the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development (RFTE - 2005)
 - ‚university of excellence‘ – Austrian Institute for Science and Technology (AIST, 2006)
 - ‚excellence clusters‘ – Austrian Science Fund (FWF, 2006)
 - ‚centers of excellence‘ – Austrian Technology Fund (FFG, 2006)
- But also in other countries, e.g. Germany:
‚initiative for excellence – elite universities‘...

The concept of ,excellence' in science and technology policy making

- A first observation: what ,excellency' is, is seriously underdefined !
- ...except for the very core of the notion: the traditional measures of scientific excellence:
 - Publications, citations, impact factors, conference contributions...

Measuring scientific excellence

- Much could be said about the measurement of (scientific) excellence and its current (mis)use:
 - Flaws of current biblio- and scientometric indicators (english language bias, citation clubs, past achievement vs. future potential, bias towards positive results, etc.)
 - Phenomenon of scientific fraud
 - Context dependency (disciplinary publication cultures etc.)
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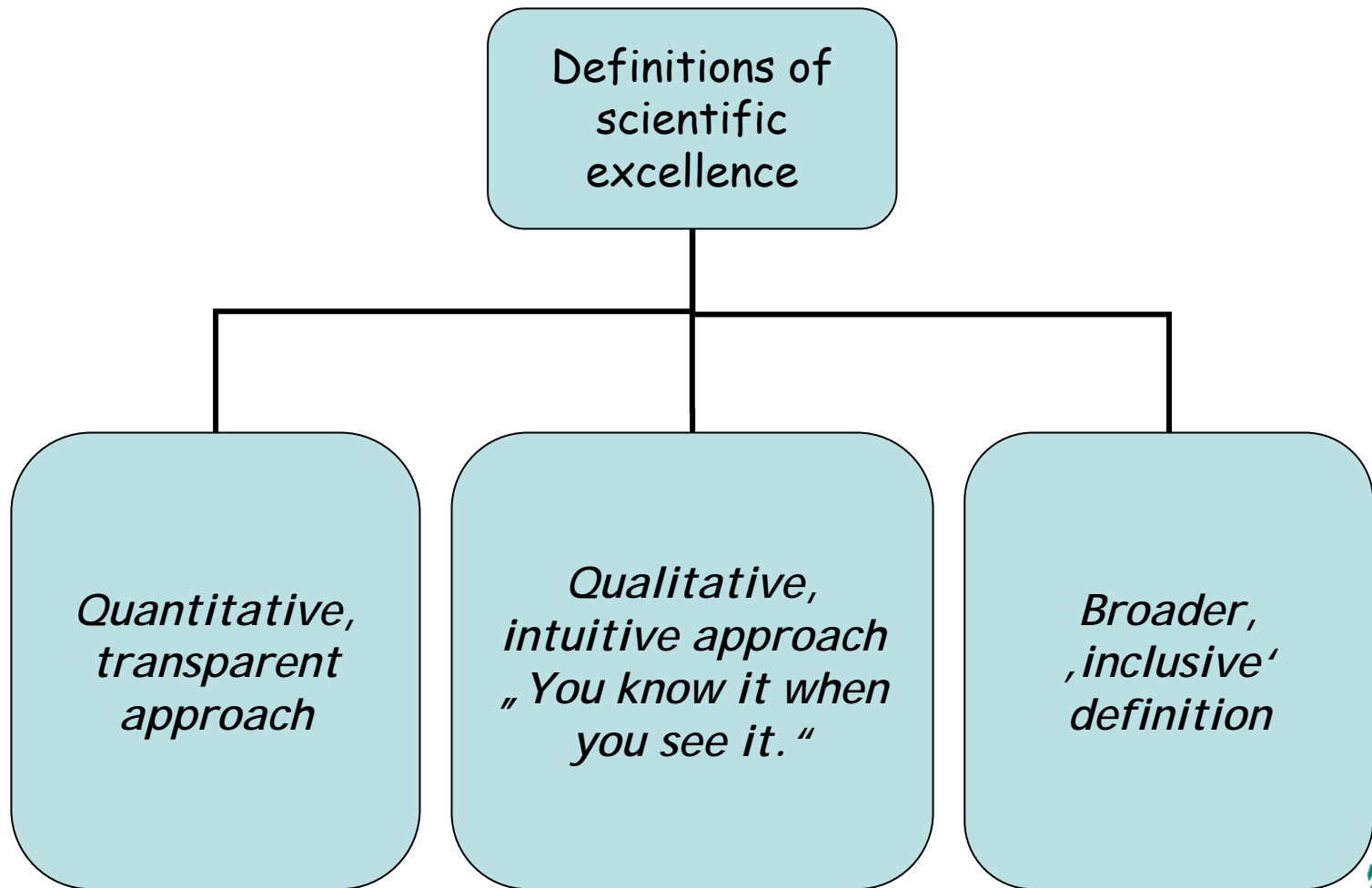
[Analogy: difficulties to measure GDP]

Gender and excellence ?

- ...but here, implications of the ‚excellence‘ paradigm for women in S&T are our focus. What could be said about that relation?
- „Excellence“ - a seemingly innocent notion...
- who would not want to be excellent? And wouldn't it be a benchmark that would ensure equal treatment of male and female scientists?

Discourse on excellence

Definitions



Findings on gender and excellence (1)

- Our findings so far indicate:
 - Current use of the notion of excellence is largely:
 - ignorant of social, disciplinary and gender differences
 - self-reproducing ('cultural cloning') in absence of external intervention (e.g. from science policy)
 - an affirmation of current system characteristics (and gender-bias) as demonstrated in various studies
 - 'neutrality' (no gender bias) in project selection at the Austrian Science Fund (FWF)
 - ..but severe barriers to women's careers in S&T in Austria

Findings on project selection (1)

- Women's share in project funding:
 - 20% of research proposals
 - 16% of approved projects
 - at Austrian universities, the share of female professors is 13.75% (2005)
 - considerable volatility !
 - Implicit ,ceiling' ?
- Thus, RTD promotion by FWF is by and large „neutral“ to gender structure of the universities and not a change agent as regards promotion of women in science.

Findings on project selection (2)

- Ability of policy steering via oriented project funding mechanisms is limited [high share of GUF] Incorporation in performance based contracts for universities might be more effective.
- Specific promotion schemes for women are small compared to overall bottom-up and thematic oriented research promotion schemes, hence are unlikely to alter the general balance
- Hence, key RTD measures have to effectively implement Gender Mainstreaming measures and Gender Budgeting measures.

Findings on career barriers (1)

- Ideas of neutrality and meritocracy are very stable in the scientific community
- M. Brouns/ Netherlands on recruiting procedures of female/male professors at Dutch universities (2006): Same qualifications, but men are just more 'suitable'. Best fit = best scientist!
- Organisation of recruiting and definitions of quality differ between disciplines, but 'gendered meritocracy' could be shown in all disciplines analysed (social/ natural sciences, medicine): First best male, then best female scientist appointed.
- Whether female scientists do have a chance depends on the commitment of established professors to the promotion of women.

Findings on career barriers (2)

- Biggest gap in the domain of informal activities. Women have less access to strategic resources, such as social networks, which are essential for career steps. Compared with men, women scientists are more socially isolated from mentors (usually male) during their training and from the network of colleagues during later phases.
- Nepotism in the scientific community: The academic promotion system, seemingly gender-neutral, may include practices more favourable for men than women (Weneras/Wold 1997).

Tentative suggestions for the direction of policy action

- Challenge the traditional excellence criteria on the basis that they don't reflect gender specific conditions
- Modify the criteria to capture the diversity of the scientific enterprise
 - Broaden them to include other dimensions of academic performance (teaching, industry-science cooperations, management and team building capacities, etc.)
 - Account for career breaks of women (age clauses, publication record,...)
- Open new avenues for women in S&T in the science system (women's tracks to leading positions in S&T)
- Evaluate the measures currently employed
- Employ a diversity of policy measures

...(m)any things go(es) !

Current policy measures in Austria

- Major programme: fFORTE [www.fForte.at]
 - women in science [fFORTE-ac]
 - “Excellentia”: Incentive system (2005-2010, 5.7 Mio Euro) to double the amount of female professors at Austrian universities. 34.000 Euro p. professor. Status: running, early phases, interim evaluation and concurrent monitoring to be launched
 - women in technology/non-university R&D facilities [FemTECH]
 - women in business [w-fFORTE]
 - Laura Bassi Laboratories: creation of centers of high quality research led by femal scientists. Status: currently being launched
- Too early to assess outcomes....
- ...but never too early for a critical debate about the basic drive of S&T policy and its impact on gender issues

Thank you for your attention !